



*Governor's Council on  
New Jersey Outdoors*

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Executive Summary May 1997

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# Governor's Council on New Jersey Outdoors

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## Interim Report Executive Summary

### *Mission:*

The Governor's Council on New Jersey Outdoors was convened by Governor Christine Todd Whitman in the Spring of 1996 to review the open space and recreational needs of the State and to identify stable sources of funding to "keep New Jersey green". The Council held three public hearings about the current and future needs for preservation of our natural and cultural resources. The public told us that we are protecting too little open space, too slowly, and that we are at risk of allowing publically-owned resources to deteriorate from inadequate stewardship. Preservation and stewardship were the ideals that were a common thread in all the testimony and these ideals form the foundation of this report.

### *Public Message:*

#### **Preservation**

New Jersey has to aggressively preserve its open spaces. The public has told us that New Jersey's ecological integrity, economic future, and quality of life are interrelated and depend on our ability to preserve a critical mass of open space. Despite a complex web of regulations and plans which help guide land use in New Jersey and despite the combined efforts of government, private groups and citizens to set aside open lands, New Jersey continues its trend towards habitat fragmentation and suburban sprawl. What we have accomplished thus far is not enough to ensure a sustainable, livable New Jersey. The public is telling us that more is needed and that the time is right to establish a strong and steady financing mechanism to support our natural and cultural resources.

Establishment of a stable source of funding would complement the implementation of the State Development and Redevelopment Plan (State Plan). The State Plan will focus development in centers, where



the infrastructure that is needed to support growth and development is most effectively and efficiently provided. The State Plan will help to identify those areas where preservation is warranted and public investment in open space is most appropriately targeted. By combining a renewed and expanded effort in open space preservation with implementation of the State Plan, New Jersey can realize its potential for remaining green and prosperous into the 21st century.

New Jersey now has 854,000 acres of public open spaces preserved. Of these, 380,000 acres have been acquired over the 35 years since the Green Acres bond program was established through public referendum. However, New Jersey needs a dramatic acceleration of effort to preserve open space for: ecological diversity, watershed and farmland protection, recreational open space, greenway corridors, and more.

### *One Million More Acres: The Goal:*

In response to public testimony and to promote a comprehensive approach, the Governor's Council has redefined the state's open space goal to include all aspects of open space preservation needs. Our vision of open space must extend beyond recreational needs. We must broaden the protective blanket of permanently preserved open space by adding one million more acres of open space to the inventory of preserved lands.

### **Open Space and Corridor Protection**

To preserve ecological diversity, watersheds, and greenways, there is a need for preservation of 300,000 to 500,000 acres for open space and corridor protection.

*Ecological Diversity:* To sustain the environment, preserve habitat, and conserve ecological diversity and, with limited acres of undisturbed open spaces left, the remaining large blocks of undisturbed open space must be preserved and linked by corridors.

*Watersheds:* Lands need to be preserved to protect the headwaters and corridors of water supply streams and reservoir systems of the state.

*Greenways:* Economic, recreational and ecological benefits could be derived by linking New Jersey's system of open space into greenway corridors through the acquisition of stream corridors, trails, rights-of-way, and easements.

## **Farmland Preservation**

Of the more than 800,000 acres of productive farmland in New Jersey, only 32,000 acres have been preserved through the sale of development rights to the state.

In order to sustain a critical mass for agricultural production, New Jersey should strive to preserve at least half of the remaining productive farmland which would mean 400,000 to 600,000 acres of farmland.

## **Recreational Open Space**

To accommodate the recreational demands of a growing and changing population, an additional 200,000 acres of recreational open space needs to be acquired.

### *Stewardship:*

## **State-Owned Lands**

Having supported 35 years of open space acquisition and facility development, the public deserves to have their investment in lands and resources cared for properly and to expect and receive high quality recreational and educational experiences.

The State manages over 563,000 acres of land, or 66% of all public lands in New Jersey. Over the years, funds for the operational and capital needs in state recreation areas have consistently fallen short of the needs, forcing most of the state's parks to operate at a minimal level. Capital spending for renovation and rehabilitation of state facilities has been deferred. Unmet capital needs translate into irreplaceable losses. In addition, all of our state lands, including wildlife management areas, now serve a wide variety of conservation and recreation purposes. Stewardship and financial support of all state lands need to be more broadly based, not relying solely upon fees and licenses from particular user groups.

## **Urban Areas**

Cities must also be green, healthy and welcoming to compete for residents, tourism and economic development opportunities. Urban areas have a critical need for funds for capital redevelopment as well as for maintenance and operation of existing facilities and lands.

### *Accounting for the Needs:*





## *Accounting for the Needs:*

### **Can We Afford It?**

We can't afford not to. The investment that the public and private sector make to protect open spaces is returned many times over in tourism, trade, employment, and enjoyment. To sustain New Jersey as a green and prosperous state, all levels of government as well as the non-profit and the private sectors will have to accelerate preservation efforts and double or even triple the current pace of acquisition. There are many funding needs necessary to attain our preservation and stewardship goals.

### **State Acquisition**

The state must make available some \$50 million to \$60 million a year for state land acquisition to make sustained and substantial progress toward open space goals.

### **Local and Non-profit Assistance**

Non-profit organizations, land trusts, and local governments supplement state funds by matching state dollars with money from other sources, thereby leveraging the buying power of state funds. A recommended allocation of \$50 million is needed for assistance in the form of grants and loans to both local governments and non-profit organizations.

### **Operation and Maintenance**

Lands in public ownership require resources for protection, maintenance and improvement. The need to serve the public by managing and improving our recreational resources is not being addressed adequately. Our facilities require an additional \$10 million to \$12 million annually for operation needs. In addition, even with approved Green Acres bond funding, there is still a need for \$20 million per year for routine capital maintenance of state facilities.

### **Historic Preservation**

The Historic Preservation Bond Program meets only a fraction of the needs as articulated to us by our citizens and evidenced by the ten year history of the bond program. We recommend that \$15 million be made available annually to support historic preservation projects statewide.

## **Farmland Preservation**

With additional demand identified for farmland preservation, \$35.5 million in funding needs are recommended to stem the loss of open lands in productive agriculture for the three basic components of the Farmland Preservation Program: easement purchase; fee simple acquisition; and soil & water conservation projects.

## **In-lieu Payments**

To correct for certain inconsistencies in current in-lieu payments for state-owned lands and to provide an incentive to support expansion of public open spaces consistent with the goals of the State Plan, it is recommended that the in-lieu property tax formula be revised to provide a sliding scale of payments to communities with the highest percentages of open space. Preliminary calculations show \$8.5 million would achieve this goal.

## **Other Critical Programs and New Ideas**

A dedicated stable funding source should target about \$10 million to resurrect some highly successful management programs as well as fund interpretive and wildlife protection programs designed to allow New Jersey residents to experience the beauty and diversity of the state's natural resources.

## *Recommended Course of Action:*

### **Stable Funding Mechanism Dedicated For Natural Resources**

Since it is unlikely that current funding levels for open space acquisition, agricultural preservation, parks, recreation, and wildlife conservation will meet the needs expressed by the public, we must identify a new and replacement funding mechanism to meet operational and capital expenditures and shift expenditures from the Green Acres bond. The Council concludes that current and future needs justify an investment of \$135 million for preservation of open space and agricultural lands and \$65 million for capital improvements, maintenance, historic restoration, in-lieu and new program needs. This means that \$200 million of annual and dedicated funding is necessary to accomplish our open space protection and stewardship goals.





## *Comment Desired for Next Hearings*

In our next round of public hearings, the Council will ask for comments and recommendations on how to meet the natural resource needs and opportunities that have been articulated to us:

To achieve our open space preservation goals, what revenue mechanisms should be considered and what level of funding could they be expected to generate, individually or in combination, to provide a dedicated fund to achieve these goals?

What non-revenue strategies could be used to strengthen open space preservation and should be considered as part of the Council's final recommendations?

We look forward to working in partnership to build a coalition to support the programs that the public has endorsed so strongly in the past.